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Australia lifts therapeutic cloning ban

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Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia - Lawmakers rejected the moral views of their political leaders Wednesday and lifted a four-year ban on cloning human embryos for stem cell research - legislation that could put Australia at the forefront of research into diseases such as diabetes and Alzheimer's.

Prime Minister John Howard, his two deputies and the leader of the major opposition party all argued the sanctity of human life must take precedence over potential cures for conditions that also include Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injuries and arthritis.

But lawmakers in the House of Representatives took advantage of a rare non-party-line vote Wednesday to side with medical researchers, voting 82 to 62 to scrap the ban. The bill was passed by the Senate last month by a razor-edge 34 to 32.

The new law allows therapeutic cloning, the splicing of DNA from skin cells into eggs to produce stem cells, also known as master cells, which are capable of forming all the tissues of the human body. The cloned embryos cannot be implanted in a womb and must be destroyed within 14 days.

The senator who drafted the bill, former Health Minister Kay Patterson, said it will slow a brain drain of scientists and enable Australian medical researchers to work with peers in countries where therapeutic cloning is allowed, including the United States, Britain and Singapore.

"We don't have a whole lot of stem cell research centers in Australia, but what I think we've done now is stemmed the tide of people leaving and enabling people to come back," Patterson told reporters.

"What I hope we see is an ability to work with people in the United States, Singapore and Britain to actually come together to produce some research," she added.

She predicted progress will be slow as government health and science authorities draft guidelines for egg donations and researchers apply for strictly regulated licenses, as well as funding.

"We're not going to see a slather of experiments and research," Patterson said. "We're going to see steady, incremental work in this area both here and overseas."

Britain became the first country to legalize the cloning of human embryos for stem cell research in 2001.

The Bush administration has banned federal funding for research on stem cell lines developed after August 2001, but cloning embryos for research is being attempted in the U.S. with private money.

The U.S. experience with therapeutic cloning was repeatedly raised by lawmakers both for and against lifting the ban during a three-day debate.

Opposition lawmaker Duncan Kerr, who supports therapeutic cloning, told Parliament he discovered during a visit to the United States before the elections last month that embryonic stem cell research was popular with voters.

"It was overwhelmingly the case that public opinion supported those candidates who identified themselves in favor of permitting stem cell research rather than prohibiting it," Kerr said.

Another opposition lawmaker, Alan Griffin, said Parliament's decision to tackle the issue of therapeutic cloning was better than "the blinkered American approach where federally funded research is limited and hamstrung but anything is possible in the privately funded sector."

A fellow opposition supporter of therapeutic cloning, Ann Corcoran, described the American system as "a hotchpotch of regulation" that lacked the Australian spirit of cooperation between federal and state governments.

But opposition legislator Warren Snowdon described the United States as "a less restrictive regulatory environment" that had already drawn several prominent Australian stem cell scientists. Snowdon voted for lifting the ban.

Parliament passed Australia's first laws on stem cell research in 2002, allowing scientists to extract stem cells from spare embryos intended for in vitro fertilization but preventing cell cloning.

Bernie Tuch, a Sydney scientist who is using stem cell research to try to create insulin-producing cells as a therapy for diabetes, said recently Australia could become a leading research center under the new law.

"What it will do is remove blocks to allow pathways of research and discovery in the longer term to be explored in Australia," Tuch told The Associated Press after the Senate passed the bill last month.

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